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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

JOFFRE'S SECOND CHANCE: LEADERSHIP IN PREPARING FOR AND CONDUCTING WAR

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMMENT
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Executive Summary

Title: Joffre's Second Chance: Leadership in Preparing for and Conducting War

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Thesis: General Joffre has been labeled a scapegoat for Plan XVII's and France's failure during the opening campaign of World War I in 1914. B. H. Liddell Hart's writings malign Joffre's leadership ability and assert that another general conceived the decisive counter attack during the Battle of the Marne. Liddell Hart has misrepresented Joffre. Through his leadership, Joffre overcame complicated alliances, political restraints, and reinvigorated the army's spirit. Furthermore, he institutionalized a new strategy and an associated plan with which to carry it out. As Plan XVII later disintegrated in the face of a determined enemy, Joffre made bold strategic and tactical adjustments and prevented his army's and his country's defeat. Given the popular, political, and strategic situation, Joffre deserves the highest accolades for his leadership before and during the First Battle of the Marne.

Discussion: In August 1914, General Joseph Joffre's bid for a French victory against Germany was Plan XVII which was based upon the widely accepted offensive doctrine of the time. Joffre's Plan XVII met with disaster against the Germans who executed General Helmuth Moltke's version of the famous Schlieffen plan. The Germans crushed France's opening offensives in The Battle of the Frontiers, forced General Joffre into a desperate retreat, and threatened Paris. France appeared to be on the verge of another humiliating defeat by the Germans. However, unlike the French army in 1870 and later in 1940, France regrouped in the face of destruction and launched a bold counter-offensive in the First Battle of the Marne and drove the Germans back. Ferocious fighting and horrific casualties occurred on both sides but Joffre had saved Paris from Germany's best chance at defeating the French.

Plan XVII and the subsequent Battle of the Frontiers were failures and the responsibility has deservedly landed squarely on Joffre's shoulders. However, Joffre deserves credit after analyzing how and why he created Plan XVII. A closer look at all surrounding variables leading up to Plan XVII's inception reveal that Joffre was actually an astute and highly capable leader during a very difficult time. Furthermore, his leadership was instrumental during France's retreat and the subsequent counter-attack during the Battle of the Marne. Joffre was prescient, courageous, and decisive as he adjusted to the dangerous and dynamic problem. He professionally analyzed the situation after the Battle of the Frontiers, developed a new strategy, adjusted his forces appropriately, appointed competent and professional personnel, and willfully supervised his men and the battle throughout its execution. General Joffre had miraculously recovered from defeat and achieved an amazing victory.

Conclusion: As the Commanding General, General Joffre rightly bears the preponderance of responsibility for Plan XVII's failure. However, Joffre still deserves credit when all factors influencing Plan XVII are considered. After his strategy failed, his leadership, force of personality, vision, and determination kept his army together while he developed a completely new strategy. Unlike the French generals in the Franco-Prussian War and World War II, Joffre recovered from the German onslaught and emerged victorious. Joffre's leadership and courage are the mark of a hero.

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Preface

This is a study of one man's military leadership during a very tumultuous and challenging time. The genesis of this thesis began in January 2009 when I was reading Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August.* As I was reading her excellent narrative about the beginning of World War I, I was struck by her description of General Joseph Joffre and his seemingly incomprehensible denial of the impending German advance through Belgium. Since I had the benefit of hindsight, I knew the French were destined for failure at the outset of the war and I became increasingly curious as to why General Joffre refused to adjust Plan XVII in light of Germany's intentions. To me, his actions, or inaction, appeared as a leadership failure.

My interest in Joffre was further piqued, again aided through hindsight, by Joffre's leadership during the French army's desperate retreat and subsequent counter-attack which checked the German advance. I questioned how Joffre, who failed so badly as a leader with Plan XVII and the Battle of the Frontiers, redeemed himself so magnificently at the First Battle of the Marne. My initial opinion asserted that Joffre was a poor strategist, an incompetent leader, and that any success was sheer luck.

After a brief discussion with Dr. Bradford Wineman, I decided to study more closely General Joffre's leadership and the circumstances surrounding the genesis of Plan XVII, the Battle of the Frontiers, and the First Battle of the Marne. My research, patiently guided by Dr. Robert Bruce, drastically altered my initial impressions concerning General Joffre and his leadership; through my readings, I concluded that Joffre was a superb leader with phenomenal endurance who led his army through difficult times both before and during the war. This paper explores General Joffre's leadership and attempts to explain why his decisions and actions were prudent, understandable, and an example of fine generalship.

I would like to personally thank Dr. Robert Bruce, Ph.D., for his patience, guidance, and willingness to be my mentor. I would also like to thank Dr. Bradford Wineman, Ph.D., for guiding me towards my topic. Furthermore, I would be remiss if I did not express my gratitude to these men for igniting in me a new passion for the study of military history. Finally, I would like to thank my wife Jess for her patience and understanding.

INTRODUCTION

In August 1914, General Joseph Joffre confidently led the French army into war against General Helmuth von Moltke's German army. Plan XVII, General Joffre's bid for victory, was based upon the widely accepted offensive doctrine of the time. (See Appendix 1) Joffre's Plan XVII was disastrous against the enemy and his army was badly bloodied by the Germans who executed Moltke's version of the famous Schlieffen plan. Plan XVII initially concentrated French forces along France's eastern borders to facilitate attacks against Germany; the Germans crushed France's opening offensives in The Battle of the Frontiers, forced General Joffre into a desperate retreat, and threatened Paris. France appeared to be on the verge of another humiliating defeat by the Germans. However, unlike the French army in 1870 and later in 1940, France regrouped in the face of destruction and launched a bold counter-offensive in the First Battle of the Marne and drove the Germans back. Ferocious fighting and horrific casualties occurred on both sides but Joffre had saved Paris from Germany's best chance at defeating the French. Unfortunately, there was no long-term decisive victory for either side. France and Germany found themselves engaged in indecisive yet deadly trench warfare for the next several years.

General Joffre has been labeled a scapegoat for Plan XVII's failure. B. H. Liddell Hart's writings malign Joffre's leadership ability and assert that Joffre was intellectually challenged, easily manipulated, and had no flexibility or imagination. Furthermore, Liddell Hart claims that another general, Joseph Galliéni, conceived the decisive counter attack during the Battle of the Marne, not Joffre.[1] Liddell Hart has misrepresented Joffre. While Plan XVII was disastrous and Joffre was responsible for it, General Joffre was an intelligent, decisive, and flexible leader whose Plan XVII was the logical outcome of France's 1914 convoluted strategic landscape and

prevailing offensive doctrinal philosophy. Through his leadership, Joffre overcame complicated alliances, political restraints, and reinvigorated the army's spirit. Furthermore, he institutionalized a new strategy and an associated plan with which to carry it out. His superior leadership and decision making skills were extremely prominent once hostilities commenced. As Plan XVII disintegrated in the face of a determined enemy, Joffre made bold strategic and tactical adjustments and prevented his army's and his country's defeat. Given the popular, political, and strategic situation, Joffre deserves the highest accolades for his leadership before and during the First Battle of the Marne.

JOFFRE THE MAN

General Joffre was a cooper's son from southern France who entered France's Ecole Polytechnique in 1869. In 1870, he joined the army and fought against Prussia as an artillery officer. After the war, he returned to school, graduated as a lieutenant in 1872, and was assigned to an engineering unit responsible for rebuilding Paris's defenses. Following promotion to captain, Joffre served in Formosa, Africa, Indochina, and Madagascar and commanded an army division and corps.[2] In 1911, Joffre was appointed chief of the General Staff and was in this billet at the beginning of World War I. Joffre's character was one of "placidity and calm" and he possessed great listening skills, but he also had an overpowering and "terrific" temper.[3] These traits made Joffre a politically savvy soldier who worked well with his civilian leaders but also allowed him to dominate the military. His authority was unquestioned by his subordinates.[4]

THE ROOTS OF PLAN XVII

Plan XVII and the subsequent Battle of the Frontiers (of which details will be discussed later) were failures and responsibility has deservedly landed squarely on Joffre's shoulders. However, Joffre also deserves credit after analyzing how and why he created Plan XVII. B. H.

Liddell Hart asserted that he was not smart enough for the job and his "slow-wits" made him a puppet to young military intellectuals of the time."[5] This is an unfair opinion as a closer look at all surrounding variables leading up to Plan XVII's inception reveal that Joffre was actually an astute and highly capable leader during a very difficult time.

The German Menace and the French Psyche

Joffre inherited an army with a dubious past, but nothing haunted the army, and France for that matter, more than the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. At the end of the war, France was "militarily destroyed, territorially mutilated," and "politically in a state of anarchy and occupied."[6] Germany forced a five billion franc indemnity on France, occupied France until the debt was paid, and annexed the provinces of Alsace-Lorraine.[7] This annexation deeply wounded France.[8] Once the debt was paid, France began rebuilding but was always reminded that they were weaker than Germany.[9] France had a smaller population, a lower birthrate, and, most insulting to France, was required to focus on passive defense as a military doctrine which was in many military thinkers minds, no way to "avenge humiliating defeat."[10] Clearly the French army was afflicted by their bitter loss to Germany, wanted the provinces of Alsace-Lorraine back, burned to be redeemed in combat, and were dissatisfied with current defensive doctrine.

Because France desired revenge and objected to their defensive doctrine, their strategy slowly evolved during the interval between the Franco-Prussian War and World War I. France initially adhered to a defensive strategy after the Franco-Prussian War. However, over time French doctrine gradually shifted to a defensive-offensive strategy where French units would initially defend and then launch counter-attacks. The evolution concluded with an offensive doctrine which abandoned all defensive thought. Additionally, by the time the war started in 1914, all of Europe had committed to the doctrine of the offensive.[11] Joffre prepared his army

for war and led them against Germany with France's interpretation of the offensive, the *offensive à outrance.*

Joffre relied heavily on this theory for one simple reason: he shaped his philosophy through the lens which prominent military theorists looked. Recent wars leading up to 1914, especially Franco-Prussian War, had been short and were decided when one side rapidly defeated the other. These quick and decisive wars became the model for European theorists and military intellectuals. Thus, based on the popular view in Europe, the next war was going to be quick and the first battles would decide the outcome. It was therefore believed that the side with the superior army which attacked first would win. The battles would be brought forth not by detailed operations plans, but by quickly massing armies in front of one another where commanders would "seek opportunities for maneuver and decisive combat." The defense was seen as inferior and weak, especially during the "decisive" battles at the beginning of a war.[12]

Joffre, as would any competent professional, also followed the doctrine and theory of his time. French military intellectuals such as Ardant du Picq, Ferdinand Foch, Henri Bonnal, and Louis Loyzeau Grandmaison espoused the offensive's superiority. Du Picq contributed "moral ascendency" or *élan* to the doctrine which postulated that the side with stronger willpower would win even if it had lesser weapons. Foch stated the latest developments in weapons technology would benefit the offensive because the increase in firepower would help gain "moral superiority" over the enemy. Bonnal claimed that the offense favored the attacker because the offensive would cause panic and confusion against undisciplined conscript armies.[13] Grandmaison, called the "high priest of the offensive," took willpower to the extreme by asserting "psychological factors are paramount" and "there are no other factors, for all others – weaponry, maneuverability – influence only indirectly by provoking moral reactions....the

human heart is the starting point in all questions of war."[14] The offensive's popularity was further strengthened in military circles by a host of young aggressive officers whose ideas were not checked by senior, yet weaker officers.[15]

Joffre believed that France was so "deeply impressed by German victories" in the Franco-Prussian War that France was "convinced of our own military inferiority as compared with our eastern neighbors" and the lessons from the Franco-Prussian War had proved that a "passive defense is the forerunner of defeat."[16] Joffre eventually exerted the greatest influence on the French army's thinking when he codified his and his contemporaries' faith in the offense in official military regulations signed by the President in 1913. These regulations contained the lessons learned from multiple map and field exercises and stated that the French army would accept only the offensive as the "law" governing military operations.[17]

French politicians, also scarred by the Franco-Prussian War, extolled the offensive doctrine as well. France's "determination to give our operations an offensive form... corresponded entirely with the enlightened opinion of the country, which was weary of eternally hearing the burden of the German menace."[18] This "enlightened opinion" manifest itself in the words of President Fallieres when he expressed his happiness with French abandonment of "defense projects" and that France was "determined to march straight against the enemy without hesitation," and "the offensive is suited to the temperament of our soldiers, and it ought to assure us the victory, provided we are willing to consecrate to the effort all our forces without exception."[19] The offensive had become almost cult-like. Concepts like *l'élan vital* (vital patriotism and enthusiasm), the superiority of willpower, and the prominence of psychological factors had indoctrinated soldiers with a spirit and desire to die for their country in a "supreme sacrifice."[20]

Plan XVII also supported France's national temperament. It was designed, with obvious support from political leadership, to put the French army in a position from where it could react to the enemy via attacks towards wherever the enemy was found. These planned follow-on thrusts resonated with France's patriotic sentiment. The Franco-Prussian War in 1870 left France a defeated nation with a shattered and humiliated army which was forced to focus on a doctrine of passive defense.[21] This humiliation had "left a dark shadow on French consciousness" and thoughts of revenge had driven French policy. The best way to avenge their loss was to offensively defeat Germany and recover the "lost provinces" of Alsace-Lorriane which had been annexed by Germany in 1870.[22] Joffre himself was emotionally invested in the concept of revenge and vowed to never let another French army meet defeat like it had in 1870 and was a staunch supporter of the offense.[23] Given the national sentiment, the political support from the top down, and his own personal experience in France's 1870 humiliation, it is no surprise Joffre developed Plan XVII as he did.

General Joffre's own convictions about the offense's superiority reinforced the lessons of history. Furthermore, the President, the French people, the most admired military minds of the time, and a young aggressive officer corps sanctioned his philosophy. The "cult of the offensive" gripped the French army like dogma and manifest itself in Plan XVII. Thus, Joffre set forth to "create a solid doctrine, impose it on men and officer alike."[24] The humiliation at the hands of the Germans in 1870 dominated French thinking and had the most significant impact on the state of the army at the time Joffre assumed command.

The Colonial Legacy

Another influence on Joffre's Plan XVII was the army's poor morale as a result of damaging scandals and a split between the colonial and metropolitan officer corps.[25] Over the

years following the Franco-Prussian War and concurrent with the doctrinal evolution, a divide developed between colonial and metropolitan officers which was deleterious to morale. Many colonial officers who had performed well overseas did not do well against a European Army which created in metropolitan officers' minds a disdain towards colonial officers. Metropolitan officers were also envious as colonial officers often received awards and promotion ahead of their domestic counterparts. Moreover, many of the metropolitan officers were arrogant and viewed colonial officers as less intelligent and socially and professionally inferior.[26] The colonial officers reciprocated the negative metropolitan attitude. They considered themselves "men of action" and that their counterparts were wasting their talent and time in Paris's social scene and academic pursuits. These "men of action" believed their overseas mission required "imagination, judgment, and special skills not required in the stiff obedience of home service." In the colonial officer's mind, "colonial service, not the *École de guerre*, was the true school of war."[27] Joffre overcame this split because he served in the colonies, fought in the Franco-Prussian War and was quite successful in both endeavors. His resulting credibility in the eyes of both officer cadres surely served to bridge the gap between the two.

Politics and Alliances

Plan XVII was the logical outcome given the amount of variables to contend with at the time. According to Holger Herwig, Joffre assumed responsibility for leading the army during a "political-strategic nightmare" when he entered his new post as the Vice President of France's Superior Council of War in 1911.[28] Alliances, geographic restraints, political pressure, and overwhelming approval of an untested strategy by his officer corps, to name a few, were all part of Joffre's puzzle and his leadership allowed him to survive this "nightmare."

The first element Joffre faced was the Franco-Russian alliance which was rooted in the Military Convention of 1892. In accordance with the Convention, France and Russia held a series of staff talks from 1900 to 1913. These talks confirmed the German army's defeat as the main objective and that simultaneous offensives by the two powers were the best way to accomplish this.[29] In 1911, Joffre sent a representative to Russia to confirm their commitment to rapid mobilization in support of the offensives and to ensure Russia could bring enough combat power against the Germans in a timely manner. The Russian Chief of Staff signed a formal agreement stating the Russians would conduct a coordinated offensive by expediting Russian mobilization should war with Germany arise.[30] Plan XVII is understandable based upon the Convention and requirement for simultaneous attacks. The agreement between the two parties created, in Joffre's mind, the "determination faithfully to carry out the terms of the convention" and he wanted "faithful attachment to the clauses of the Convention.[31] Joffre was in no position by 1914 to do anything contrary to arrangements with his Russian Allies from both an alliance perspective and an integrity perspective.

Joffre was also not in a position to radically depart from an offensive plan because his predecessor, General Victor Michel, had attempted to do so. Michel presented his new plan to the Superior Council of War on July 19, 1911, and was forced to resign two days later. Michel had been very concerned about a German offensive through Belgium and proposed a new strategy to defeat it. He intended to defend along the entire length of borders with Germany, Luxembourg, and Belgium. A larger army was required to cover such a large area, so Michel's plan incorporated the use of reservists to create "demi-brigades." The composition of demi-brigades would have a combined formation of reservist and active duty personnel, and therefore a mobilization of all of France's military capacity. This plan was universally rejected as senior

officials doubted reservists' combat capability and called Michel "looney."[32] Michel was subsequently relieved and replaced by Joffre. The newly appointed Joffre had received a not so subtle message from Michel's firing: France's senior leadership would not tolerate deviations from existing strategy and would punish dissenters. The events surrounding Michel's relief and Joffre's appointment assert that Joffre's Plan XVII was in many ways a plan of professional survival.

Joffre's next concerns were British participation and Belgian neutrality. Joffre has been criticized for Plan XVII's geographic arrangements, specifically with respect to Belgium and the apparent lack of attention it received. However, Joffre did indeed consider a German advance through Belgium during planning and he did address it. In January 1912, he appealed to his superiors to allow him to advance into Belgium at the news of a potential German attack through Belgium. The Premier at the time, Joseph Cailleaux, denied his request. In February 1912, after Cailleaux was replaced by Raymond Poincaré, Joffre again requested permission to enter Belgium on grounds that it would allow maneuver around the enemy fortifications at Metz-Thionville, threaten the enemy lines of communications, and facilitate better employment of expected British forces. Poincaré denied Joffre's request, stating that such a move may force Belgium to side with Germany and cause the British to withdraw their support. Finally, the British had been very clear about two issues: France was not to violate Belgium's neutrality until Germany had done so first and that previous agreements between Britain and France were no guarantee of British assistance.[33] Thus, General Joffre was politically restrained if he desired or required allied assistance.

The death knell of a French advance through Belgium before Germany sounded in November 1912. A British representative, General Wilson, informed France that if they invaded

Belgium and Belgium subsequently sided with Germany, then Britain would be obliged to side with Belgium against France. Therefore, France had "no interest" in violating Belgium's neutrality first. This information caused Joffre "to renounce all ideas of a manoeuvre *a priori* through Belgium."[34] Joffre noted "the menace of a German invasion coming through Belgium had not escaped me, as has been so often asserted."[35]

While not being able invade Belgium, Joffre still believed that an advance through Belgium was the best option and he therefore shrewdly created a plan still able to address it. Knowing that further public discussion of Belgium would be politically dangerous and could put the tenuous British support in jeopardy, he concealed from his superiors and his subordinates his intentions to use Belgium once Germany violated Belgian neutrality.[36] Based upon the restraints placed upon Joffre concerning Belgium by the terms of agreement with the British and the explicit guidance from his superiors, one cannot fault Joffre for his armies' geographic locations in Plan XVII. Furthermore, he deserves credit for his artful contingency planning while contending with difficult political issues.

Overt political support for Joffre's also influenced Plan XVII's genesis. For one, Joffre had just witnessed his predecessor's demise for attempting to change strategy; Joffre was not ignorant and most likely would not tempt fate as Michel had. Second, Belgian neutrality was not threatened which increased the likelihood of British assistance and the terms of the Russian Alliance were driving France towards a coordinated offensive. Joffre was also a politically accepted individual whose ideas received great support from political figures like Joseph Paul-Boncour, who stated "When we hear that our army has returned to the most offensive notions of strategy and tactics, we see in this no drawbacks inasmuch as we believe that it is at once a military truism and a French truism."[37] In 1912, President Poincaré himself strongly supported

Joffre's strategic direction. He noted, "The President of the Republic, notes with pleasure the defensive projects which constitute our own admission of inferiority have been renounced. Henceforth we are resolved to march straight at the enemy in a reflex action. The offensive, which suits the national temperament, shall assure us of victory."[38] As the commanding general, Joffre deserves blame for Plan XVII's ultimate failure, but much fault also resides with French government officials who failed to supervise "sane implementations" of strategy and "did not live up to their constitutional responsibilities."[39]

Joffre leadership transcended many difficult issues and allowed him to focus on Plan XVII. France's desire to avenge the Franco-Prussian War defeat coupled with an unpopular passive defensive doctrine was the root of the problem. He united divided officer cadres, won support from his officer corps, gained and maintained support from his civilian authorities, and developed a widely supported plan. Scandals, politics, and division of the previous years had produced "timid and indecisive" officers who were unable to "act with resolution."[40] Leadership failures devastated the army's morale and Joffre's leadership was instrumental in reviving a scarred army.

Joffre impressively navigated the convoluted political-military situation from 1911 to 1914, received approval from his civilian masters, and implemented a new doctrine. Plan XVII is coherent and logical after considering the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, a dominant, cult-like doctrine, tenuous alliances, territorial restrictions, overt direction from superiors aligned with his personal beliefs, and political shirking. Joffre was the individual charged with developing war plans and he surmounted significant obstacles in seeing his design come to fruition.

PLAN XVII

Plan XVII reflected the *offensive à outrance,* preserved Belgian neutrality, facilitated British participation, and supported the Franco-Russian Alliance's terms. Additionally, it patriotically targeted Alsace-Lorraine, and received support from military and government personnel. It concentrated five armies in northeast France with First, Second, Third, and Fifth Armies along France's German, Luxembourg, and Belgian borders. Fourth Army was in reserve and centrally located behind Second and Third armies. Joffre also created four "Reserve Division groups" which were essentially corps-sized elements. The First Group was positioned on the right flank of First Army, the Fourth Group on the left flank of Fifth Army, and the Second and Third Groups behind Second and Third Armies. (See Appendix 1)

According to the plan, this concentration gave Joffre a central position from which he could exercise multiple offensive options based upon the German's actions. The First and Second armies would attack east into Lorraine just south of the Metz-Thionville fortifications. The Third Army was to attack east into the Metz-Thionville fortifications and either seize Metz or repel German attacks originating from these fortifications. The Fifth Army was to attack the German right wing. If the Germans did not enter Belgium or Luxembourg, the Fifth would attack north of the Metz-Thionville fortifications into Lorraine, leaving some combat forces to defend along the Belgian border. If the Germans did enter Belgium, the Fifth Army would attack north into Belgium. The Fourth Army's mission was also contingent upon German actions. If Germany did not enter Belgium and Luxembourg, the Fourth Army would support the offense into Lorraine by attacking east between Second and Third armies. However, if Germany did enter Belgium, the Fourth Army would attack north into Belgium between Third and Fifth Army. Finally, a British force of approximately six divisions was incorporated into the plan. While this

force's timely arrival and even availability were uncertain, Plan XVII still assumed that the British would occupy a position on the left of the Fifth Army.[41]

Robert Doughty labeled Plan XVII a plan of concentration, not a strategic or operational plan designed to counter an enemy course of action. Joffre intended to develop detailed strategic decisions and operational plans when he gained a clearer political and military picture as the war began. This intent is reflected in his subordinate units' broad missions, which were to be elaborated upon after he assembled his armies and determined the German course of action.[42] However, while Joffre's plan was widely supported by military personnel and politicians alike and met all challenging constraints, the French were headed for disaster.

DISASTER FOLLOWED BY REDEMPTION

The French army mobilized for war on August 2, 1914, and Germany declared on war on France on August 3. Shortly thereafter Germany marched into Luxembourg and Belgium and France countered. (See Appendix 2) The two armies, both with plans predicated on the superiority of the offensive, collided in what is known as the Battle of the Frontiers. In accordance with his plan, Joffre delayed further action until he discerned German intentions and then issued his attack orders. On August 14th, Joffre's First and Second Armies attacked into Lorraine and were eventually driven back to the vicinity of their original starting positions by an August 20th German counter attack. On August 21st, France's Third and Fourth armies advanced towards German units between Bastogne and Thionville in Belgium and encountered well-prepared positions. Following these failed offensives, German counter attacks, as seen in the south, also drove the Third and Fourth armies back to their original assembly areas by August 23rd. To the north, the French Fifth Army, after several mission adjustments and position changes, was preparing to cross the Sambre River East of Namur on August 21st when

the German *Second Army* attacked it. On August 22nd, the Fifth Army was driven further south after failing to drive the Germans north across the Sambre. (See Appendix 3) On the 23rd, while still fighting to their northern front against the German *Second Army*, the French Fifth Army's right and rear flank were threatened by the German *Third Army* and thus the Fifth Army's commander withdrew to the south. Also on August 23rd, the British Expeditionary Force, much smaller than anticipated but nonetheless present, was heavily engaged with the German *First Army* at Mons and eventually withdrew.[43] (See Appendix 4)

With Plan XVII's associated offenses in shambles, General Joffre regrouped and on August 25th issued orders outlining his new strategy to envelop the German right flank. To accomplish this, Joffre astutely formed a new unit (eventually named the Sixth Army) from units on his right and center. The Sixth Army, in conjunction with the Fifth and Fourth armies would attack the German right flank; Joffre envisioned the counter-offensive originating from Amiens. In order to buy time to form the new army and reposition it, Joffre's conducted a delaying mission while maintaining a contiguous front. To maintain the required front, Joffre needed to fill a void between the Fourth and Fifth armies. In order to close this gap, Joffre created yet another army (the Ninth) and it occupied the void between Fourth and Fifth armies. The British Expeditionary Force was the new plan's final component and was needed to assist the delay mission by filling the gap between the Fifth and Sixth armies but their ability and desire to do so was in doubt. Following the British defeat at Le Cateau on August 26th, the British rapidly retreated in an effort to gain some space to rest and reorganize. (See Appendix 5) To help the British, Joffre ordered the Fifth Army to counter-attack the pursuing German *Second Army*. The resulting August 29th battle near St.-Quentin successfully slowed the German advance (and

precipitated a fateful German First Army direction change), but the British commander, Sir John French, still refused to participate in the delay for two more days.[44] (See Appendix 6)

Additionally, the Fifth Army had resumed its retrograde and Joffre learned that the enemy had crossed the River Somme near the new Sixth Army's assembly area; Joffre realized he would be unable to launch the decisive flanking maneuver from Amiens and he, therefore, moved the counter offensive's starting position southward to Compiegne. This order was short-lived as the Germans eventually found the space between the Fifth and Sixth armies and, advancing through it, crossed the Oise River, thereby negating the use of Compiegne. On September 1st, Joffre ordered the Sixth Army to fall back towards Paris and ordered the Fourth and Fifth armies to fall back to the Seine and Aube Rivers.[45]

Finally, after intervention form Britain's Secretary of State for War Lord Kitchener on September 1st, Sir John French agreed to cooperate with Joffre and began to withdraw east of Paris to the Marne River. On September 2nd, the French were arrayed in a west to east concave line from Paris to Verdun. Joffre recognized an opportunity: by drawing the Germans into the salient (the concave line), he could fix them in place and execute his flanking attack. Therefore, he slightly adjusted his plan and ordered his armies to be prepared to resume an offensive across the entire front and for the Sixth Army and other forces in Paris to attack the German right flank. On September 4th, following, numerous meetings involving the Parisian garrison commander General Galliéni, the Sixth Army commander General Maunoury, numerous liaison and staff officers, the Fifth Army's new commander General d'Espèrey, and multiple command visits by Joffre, Joffre published his attack order. The Battle of the Marne began on September 6th.[46] (See Appendix 7)

The 6th Army attacked east from Paris, engaged the German *First Army's* flank, and fought a four day battle along the Ourcq River. Simultaneously, the French Fifth Army attacked the German *Second Army* to the north and drove it back. These two attacks, along with German leadership decisions, were fortuitous for Joffre as they opened up a large gap between the German *First* and *Second Armies* which the British exploited. (See Appendix 8) To the Fifth Army's right, the Ninth, Fourth, Third, Second, and First armies were also engaged with the Germans. Over a period of approximately four days, Joffre led his forces through personal persuasion as his armies to the east held against the German advance. Ultimately, the gap between the German *First* and *Second Armies* compelled the German Second Army to withdraw, leaving the German *First Army* isolated and creating a yawning gap between the *First Army* and the rest of the German forces. By September 9th, the French had re-crossed the Marne to the north and the Germans were in full retreat. Joffre had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat in the First Battle of the Marne.

AN UNENCUMBERED LEADER

General Joffre was able to achieve victory because he was finally unencumbered by the previously discussed requirements once war with Germany commenced. He had one prerogative: stop the German advance. This release from political restraints coupled with his soldiers' grim determination finally allowed General Joffre to excel. Joffre's true character was evident during the crisis after the Battle of the Frontiers. In the face of disaster, General Joffre's superior leadership and willpower carried the day and resulted in victory in the Battle of the Marne. One could understand if General Joffre had lost complete control of his forces and himself as each of his armies met defeat and Plan XVII was rendered obsolete. However, Joffre maintained his composure. Against overwhelming odds he devised a new strategy, organized

and led a treacherous retrograde, and patiently waited for the opportunity to deliver a decisive blow to Germany. Joffre's personal leadership and exemplary decision-making transformed initial French failures into a German defeat.

Joffre was a great leader who led by example with determination and strength[47] and was the "idol of the army."[48] While he possessed some idiosyncrasies, a British liaison officer stated "placidity and calm were his dominant characteristics." He was a good listener, and spoke only when he had something to say. He was also forceful and "kept absolute discipline with his generals." Most importantly, he had "a great clarity of vision," was self-confident, courageous, and composed, and had incredible endurance.[49] As the German advance swept through France, crushed Joffre's very own Plan XVII, and stymied the vaunted *offensive à outrance*, Joffre's character traits undoubtedly helped him maintain cohesion within his army and impose his will on the enemy. Joffre's very own panacea for victory (Plan XVII) fell apart and he had no contingency plan, but his personal example positively affected his generals and his character traits fortified his composure.

Joffre took ownership of his mission and constantly supervised and engaged his subordinates. Unlike Moltke, Joffre made numerous trips to his generals' command posts, assessed the situation personally, and conversed face-to-face with army commanders. His appearances no doubt influenced his general officers to take action and this was best illustrated in his meetings with General Lanrezac, Commanding General of the Fifth Army. Lanrezac had been indecisive at the Battle of the Sambre, had failed to launch mandated counter-attacks during the retreat, and had seriously damaged the French relationship with the British by leaving the British flank vulnerable to attack and refusing to come to the British's assistance.[50] On August 28th, Joffre traveled to Lanrezac's headquarters and directed the Fifth Army to conduct a limited

counter-attack to protect the British retreat. After a heated discussion Joffre ensured his directive would be carried out by issuing Lanrezac written orders and by returning the next day to supervise the mission's execution.[51] The next day, Joffre returned to Lanrezac's headquarters and found the situation in order.[52] General Joffre reinforced the situation's gravity through his personal attention and direct engagement with Lanrezac.

Another aspect of Joffre's leadership and influence over commanders was his unbridled willingness to relieve "weak commanders" and commanders "who failed to meet his expectations." Joffre relieved two army, ten corps, and thirty-eight division commanders. As a result, Joffre, increased his control over the army, promoted proven fighters into important leadership positions, and increased the army's performance.[53] This high attrition amongst subordinate commanders certainly communicated Joffre's demand for decisive action and cooperation from his followers which was critical to maintain control of a disintegrating situation.

Of all the sackings, Joffre's relief of Lanrezac was the most difficult yet most significant. On September 3rd General Joffre prepared himself for the massive counter-offensive against the German right flank and had "passed in mental review all the chiefs who would be called upon to play a decisive part in the action." Joffre had serious concerns about Lanrezac who had "never ceased to discuss the orders given him and to raise objections to everything." Joffre believed Lanrezac had become "hesitating and timorous" and had been "profoundly shaken." The final stroke was Lanrezac's terrible relationship with Sir John French which had "compromised the cooperation of the British Army with our own." Joffre concluded that Lanrezac was a liability and need to be relieved. Joffre's pre-existing personal relationship with Lanrezac exacerbated the decision's weight. They had served together before and Joffre had the utmost respect for

Lanrezac's ability.[54] Joffre fired a well-respected officer who was also a close personal friend. Joffre displayed amazing vision in recognizing the need for the Fifth Army to be viable and British cooperation; Lanrezac's removal ensured both. He also displayed amazing courage by firing a friend. Joffre replaced Lanrezac with General d'Esperey who was aggressive and flexible, had twice saved Lanrezac's army as a corps commander, and was instrumental in resuming the offensive at the beginning of the Marne. Had Joffre not fired Lanrezac it is doubtful the Fifth Army would have attacked when ordered.

Joffre was decisive in the face of uncertainty. The first of many challenging decisions was the decision to abandon the *offensive à outrance* and Plan XVII and "face the monumental task of devising the strategic basis for future operations, of supervising the retirement of his armies, of regrouping his forces and reorganizing the high command..."[55] In addition to adopting a new strategy, he also promulgated new requirements at the tactical level, urging better coordination between supporting fires and infantry maneuver.[56] It took monumental courage and steadfast leadership to recognize Plan XVII's and the *offensive à outrance's* (and therefore personal and professional) failure and make appropriate adjustments. In combat, Joffre essentially admitted his failures to the entire army, went against the reigning French military culture, current politics, and his own personal beliefs, all of which had promulgated the indomitability of the *offensive à outrance*. Joffre bravely abandoned the opus of his life's work in a single stroke and without reservation.

One significant decision involved General Lanrezac prior to his relief. This decision ordered Lanrezac to attack towards Guise-St. Quentin to relieve pressure on the retreating British to allow them to reorganize (Joffre communicated his decision in the meeting discussed in the above paragraph). The manifold reasons Lanrezac proposed against this attack irritated Joffre

but he convinced Lanzerac of the attack's necessity to save the British forces.[57] This decision and Joffre's force in seeing it carried out were instrumental in preserving Joffre's new strategy. While the attack did not go exactly as planned, Joffre's order successfully "relieved pressure on the British army and our Sixth Army."[58]

As an unintended consequence and unknown to Joffre at the time, the maneuver also caused the German *First Army* to change direction.[59] Had Joffre not ordered the Fifth Army to attack or had he failed to personally intervene, it is possible the British would have been defeated, the Sixth Army would have never been able to detrain, and the German *First Army* would have enveloped the French left flank. In other words, the French would have lost to Germany had Joffre not been so decisive and forceful with Lanrezac.

The decisions to create the Sixth and Ninth armies were also essential to the battle's outcome. Joffre's actions to form two new armies and assign them the appropriate leadership while in combat were courageous and bold. Foch's Ninth Army successfully resisted the determined German attack at Joffre's center. Foch held firm at the Marshes of St. Gond and defeated the enemy's main thrust at his right flank with a last minute reinforcement from his left flank (made possible by help from d'Esperey.) Had he not formed the Ninth Army, it is likely the Germans would have exploited the gap between Fourth and Fifth Armies and all would have been lost for France.[60] The Sixth Army, commanded by Maunoury, eventually struck Germany's right flank and fixed the German First Army along the Ourq River. Joffre's orders to the Sixth, Fifth and Ninth and British Armies on the left half of his frontage eventually opened the gap which the British exploited and turned the tide of the war's opening campaigns.

Joffre was prescient and courageous as he adjusted to the dangerous and dynamic situation. He recognized the need for a new strategy (still predicated on the offense) and the

success at the Marne indicates he chose correctly. However, Joffre needed time and space to coordinate the decisive flanking attack; therefore he created and shifted new units led by aggressive and competent officers. These units filled critical gaps and conducted limited objective attacks to separate his force from Moltke's. He placed quality men in charge of his forces. Maunoury's, Foch's, and d'Esperey's actions speak for themselves, but Joffre's decisions are what placed these men in critical places at critical times. Finally, Joffre's decision to attack the German right flank when he did was timely and decisive. Some controversy exists over whether it was Galliéni who sent Maunoury against the right flank, but overall, Joffre was the Commander-in-Chief and evidence exists that Joffre had already decided to attack as Galliéni was recognizing the opportunity.[61] Joffre professionally analyzed the situation after the Battle of the Frontiers, developed the correct strategy, adjusted appropriately, appointed competent and professional personnel, and willfully supervised his men and the situation throughout execution.

CONCLUSION

The Battle of the Marne, unfortunately, did not end the war. By mid-November 1914, Germany and France transitioned from the "War of Movement" to the infamous stalemate of trench warfare; both sides continued slaughtering one another in indecisive battles for four more years. The Battle of the Marne did, however, save Paris and deny Germany their best chance at a swift victory as they were now faced with a war on two fronts.[62]

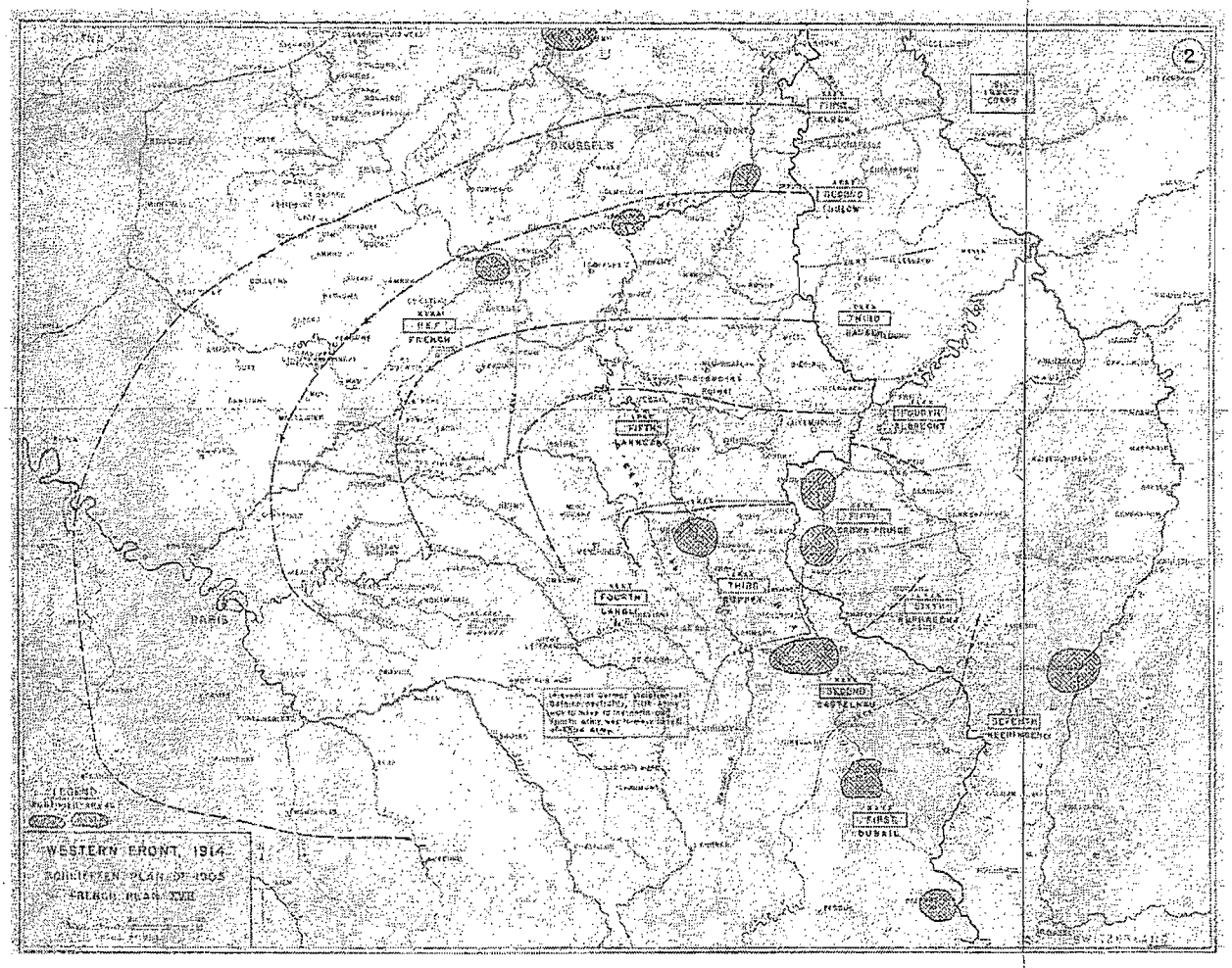
As the Commanding General of the French Army in 1914, General Joffre rightly bears the preponderance of responsibility for Plan XVII's failure during the Battle of the Frontiers. However, if Joffre is responsible for the Plan XVII, he rightly deserves credit when all factors influencing Plan XVII are considered. Joffre assumed command of a disheartened army with no direction, survived the treacherous territory of political and strategic pressures, and

institutionalized a new and popular doctrine. After his strategy failed, his leadership, force of personality, vision, and determination kept his army together while he developed a completely new strategy. Unlike the French generals in the Franco-Prussian War and World War II, Joffre recovered from the German onslaught and emerged victorious. Joffre was responsible for the brilliant recovery, retreat, and bold counter-offensive resulting in his country's salvation; he deserves the title "Hero of the Marne." When looked at holistically, it truly was the "Miracle on the Marne" and Joffre's leadership and courage are the mark of an exemplary general.

Today, military and civilian leaders can glean several lessons from Joffre's and France's story. First, war plans will often be built around alliances but it is critical that planners consider the alliance a benefit to a plan and not a necessity. The military must be prepared for unilateral action as there is too much at stake to depend completely on allied support. Arguably the Russian and British alliances helped Joffre, but much uncertainty and doubt surrounded their efficacy and commitment. Second, the military needs to be wary of allowing doctrine to become dogma. The "cult of the offensive" became dogma for all of France and led to disaster in the Battle of the Frontiers. Third, leaders must not fear questioning and changing doctrine. Joffre showed great courage and willingly abandoned the failed doctrine and implemented successful changes while still engaged with enemy forces. Each situation will be unique and will require an original and appropriate strategy. Fourth, an equal share of responsibility rests on the government's civilian leadership. Constitutionally responsible for the military, the senior civilian leadership needs to ensure oversight is measured and appropriate and that they themselves do not promote an inappropriate doctrine. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, leadership will always be at a premium. Joffre was a good leader and positioned quality commanders; he ensured the correct people were in the appropriate position and he swiftly removed ineffective

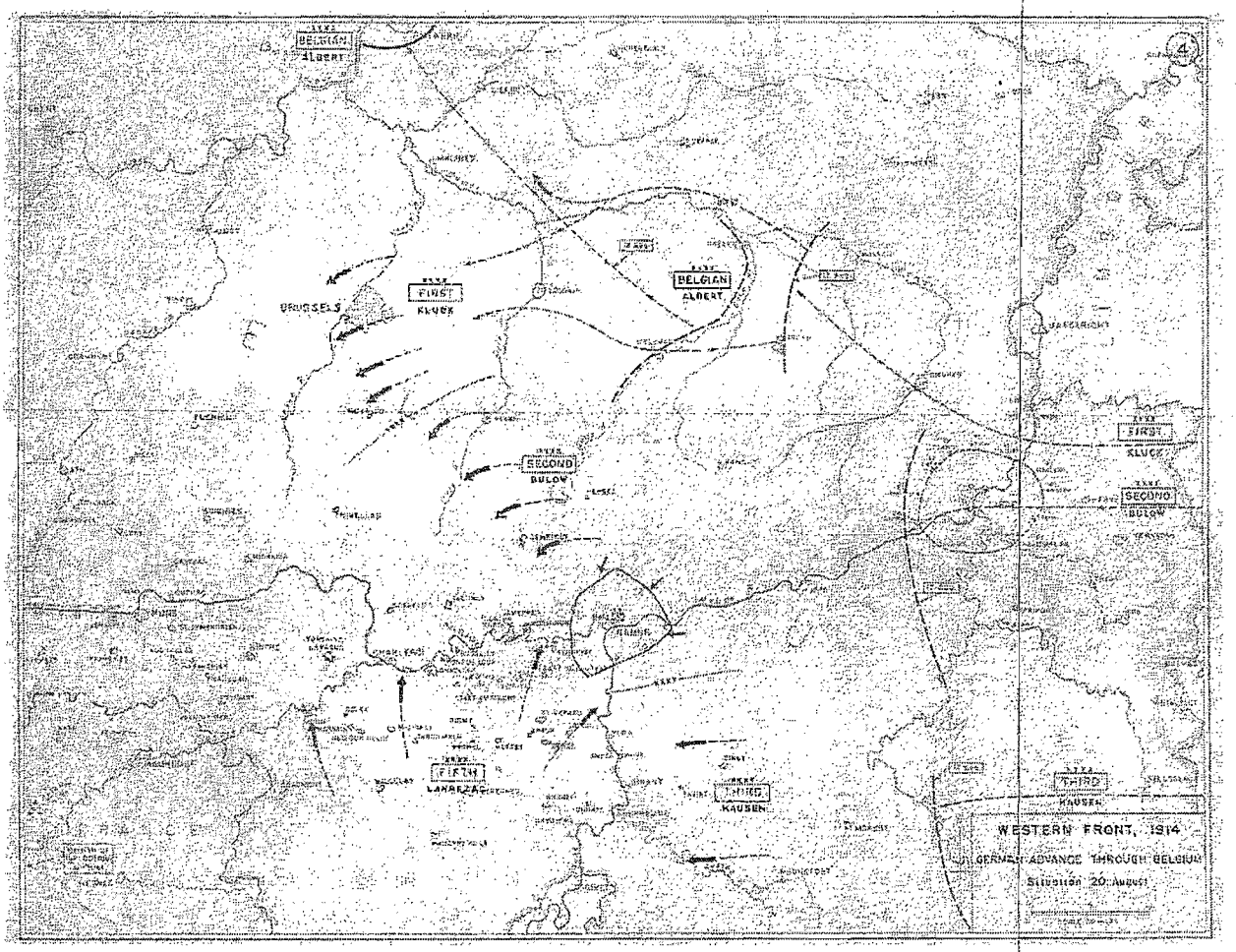
officers. It requires courage to relieve a subordinate commander in the field and too often incompetence is overlooked or tolerated. War is a treacherous business and needs to be guided by the best people the country has to offer and General Joffre was just that person when his country and army needed him.

Appendix 1: Plan XVII and the Schlieffen Plan



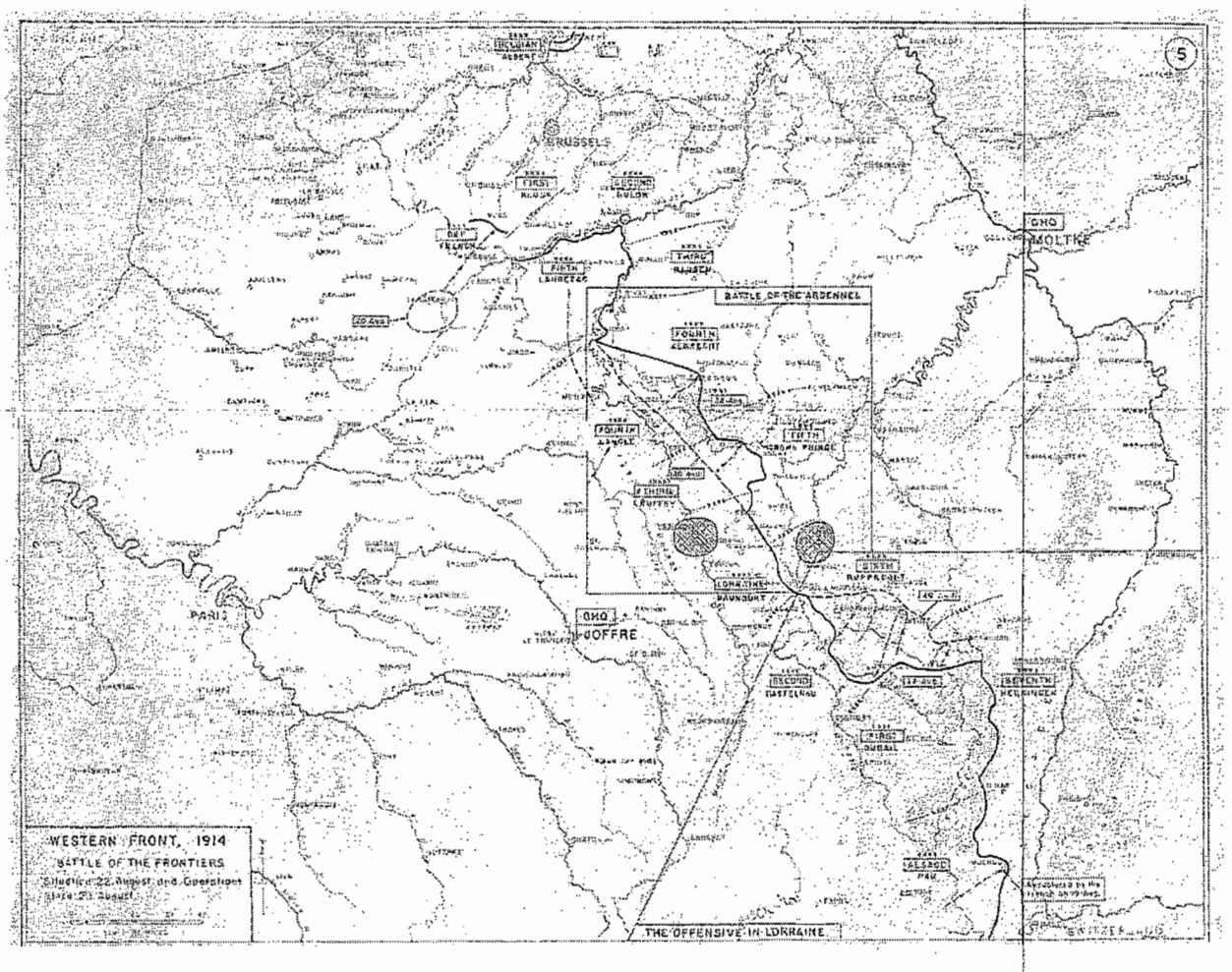
From http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/warplans.htm

Appendix 2: Germany Invades Belgium



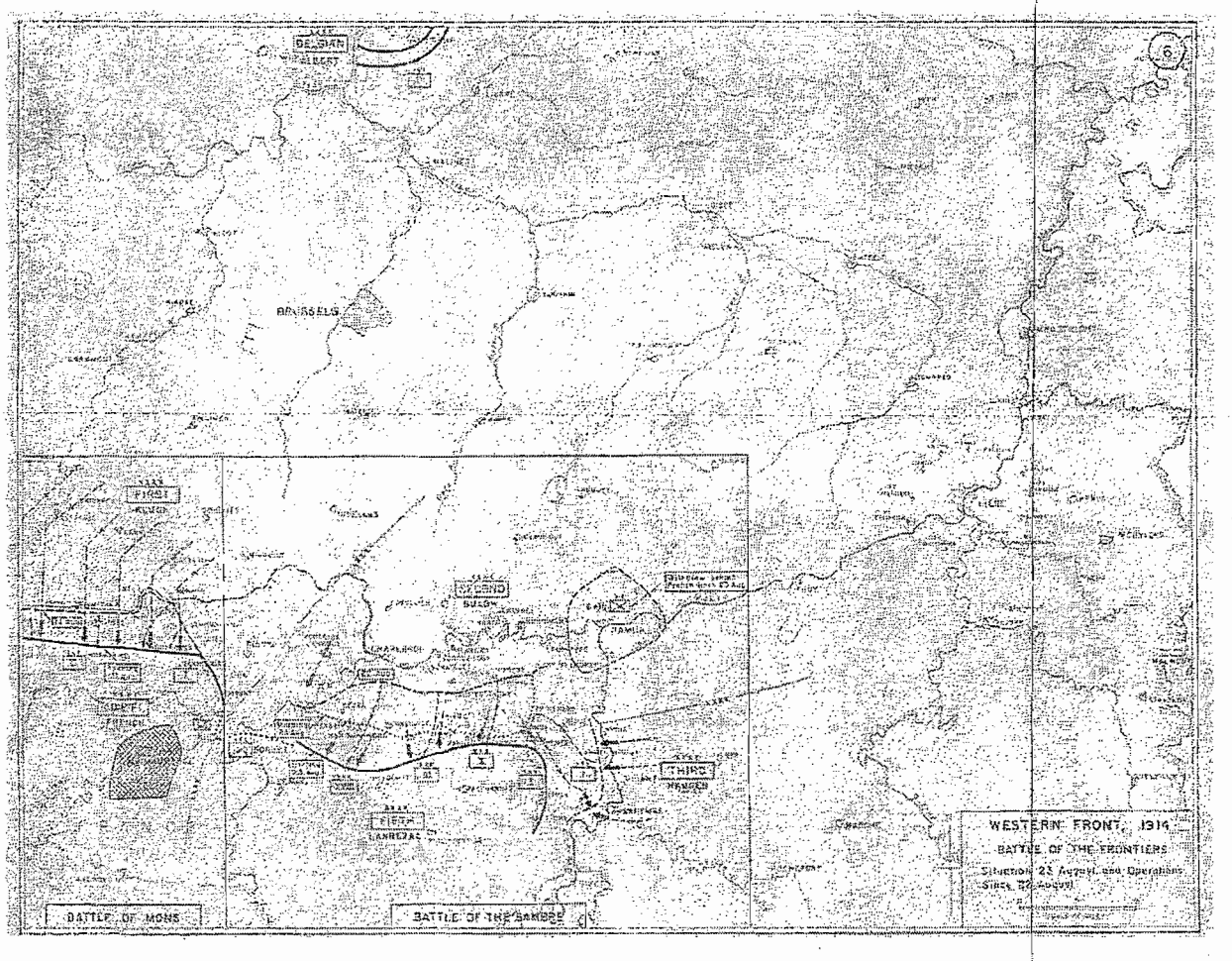
From http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/westernfront.htm

Appendix 3: August 22nd



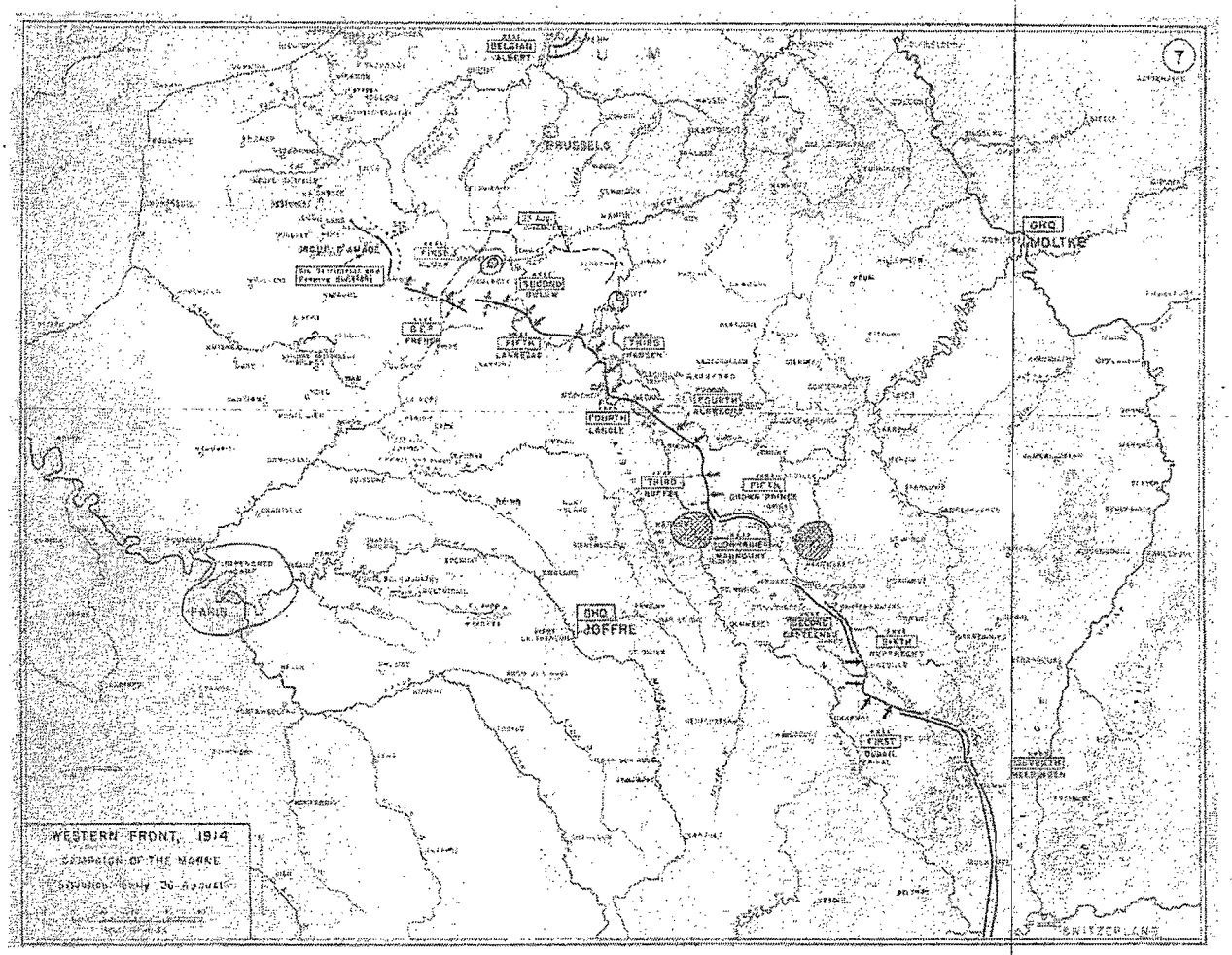
From http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/westernfront.htm

Appendix 4: August 23rd



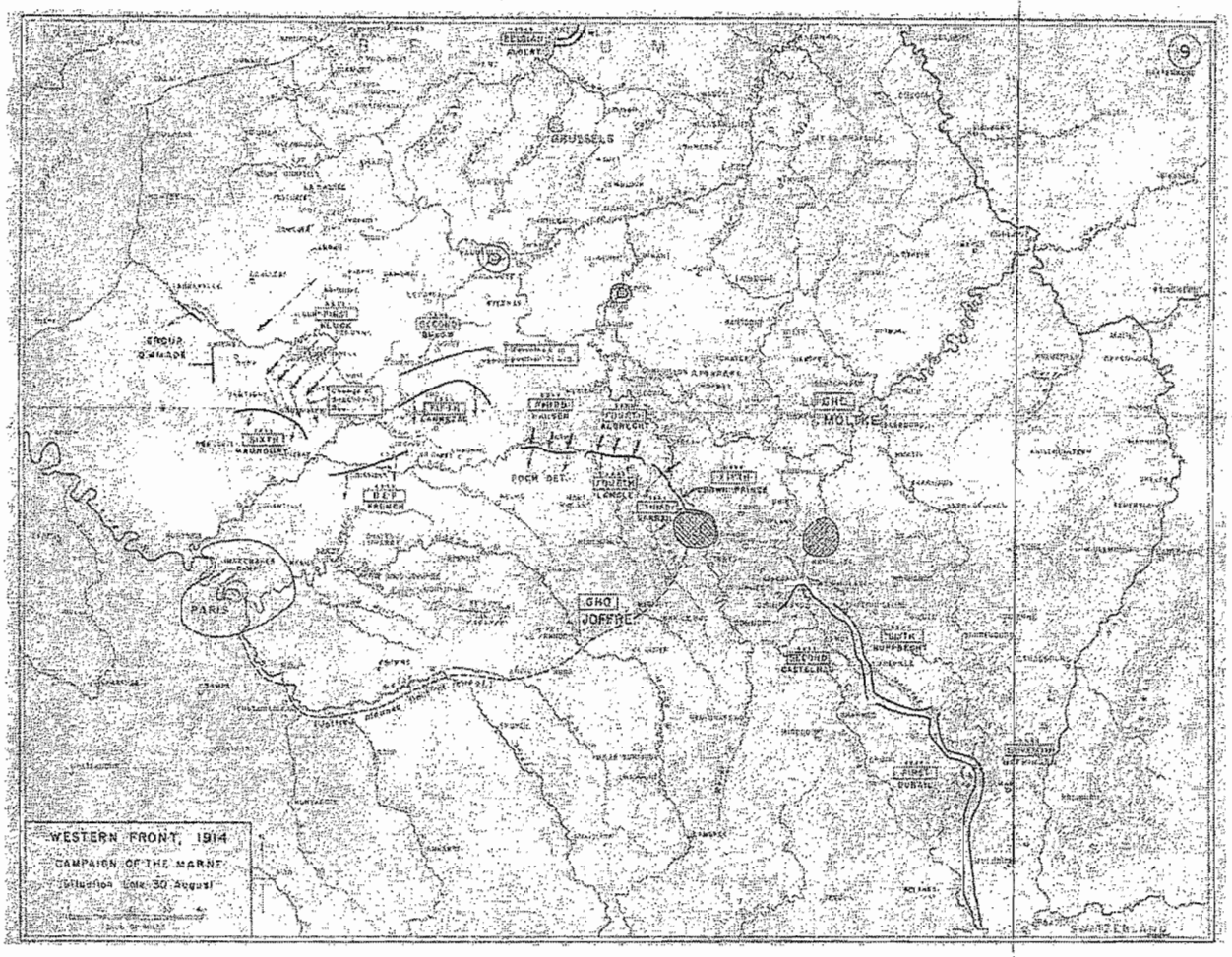
From http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/westernfront.htm

Appendix 5: August 26th



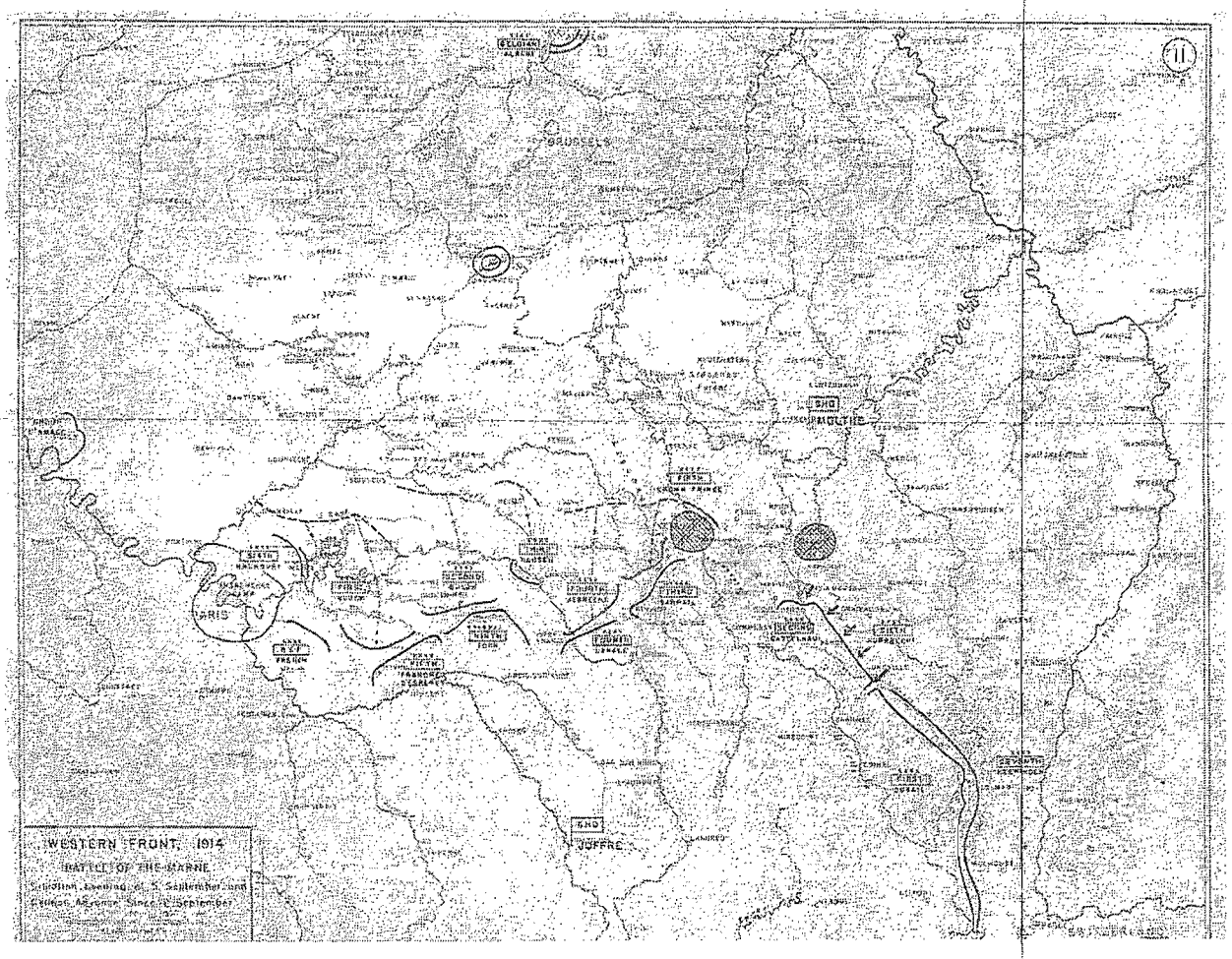
From http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/westernfront.htm

Appendix 6: August 30th



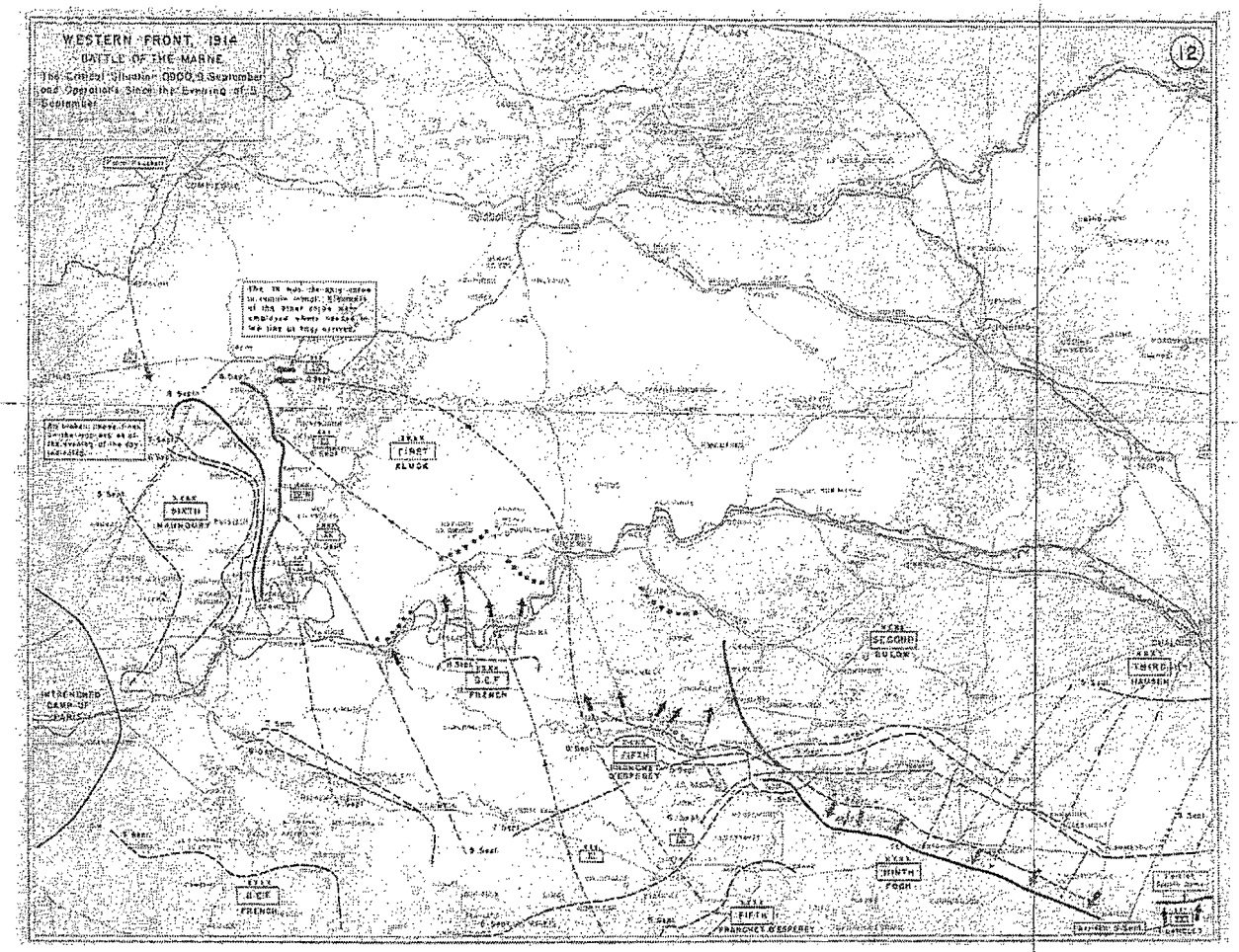
From http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/westernfront.htm

Appendix 7: September 5th



From http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/westernfront.htm

Appendix 8: September 9th



From http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/westernfront.htm

Notes

[1]Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Reputations, Ten Years After* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1928), 12-39; Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *History of the First World War* (London: Cassell, 1970) 86; Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Through the Fog of War* (New York: Random House, 1938), 62-64.

[2] Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 15; Charles H. L. Johnston, *Famous Generals of the Great War Who Led the United States and Her Allies to a Glorious Victory* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 4-11.

[3] Edward Spears, *Liaison, 1914: A Narrative of the Great Retreat* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran, and Company, 1931), 22-23.

[4] Sewell Tyng, *The Campaign of the Marne, 1914* (New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1935), 15.

[5] Liddell Hart, *Reputations, Ten Years After*, 12.

[6] John F. V. Keiger, *France and the Origins of the First World War*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 4.

[7] Keiger, 5; Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962), 29-31.

[8] Liddel Hart, *Reputations, Ten Years After*, 17.

[9] Keiger, 4.

[10]Asprey, *The First Battle of the Marne*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 20.

[11]Michael Howard, "Men Against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age,* ed. Peter Paret, Gordon Craig, and Felix Gilbert, 510-526 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 510.

[12] Jonathan. M. House, "The Decisive Attack: A New Look at French Infantry Tactics on the Eve of World War I," *Military Affairs* 40, no. 4 (December 1976), 164.

[13] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 25-26.

[14] Douglas Porch, *The March to the Marne: The French Army, 1871-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 215.

[15] Porch, *The March to the Marne*, 216.

[16] Joseph Joffre, *The Personal Memoirs of Joffre, Field Marshal of the French Army*, vol. 1, translated by Thomas Bentley Mott (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), 26.

[17] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 26.

[18] Joffre, 30.

[19] Joffre, 30.

[20] Howard," Men Against Fire," 522.

[21] Asprey, 18.

[22] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 56.

[23] Holger H. Herwig, *The Battle of the Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2009), 57.

[24] Joffre, 30.

[25] Porch, *The March to the Marne*, 72, 101-104; David B. Ralston, *The Army of The Republic: The place of the Military in the Political Evolution of France, 1871-1914* (Cambridge, MA: M. I. T. Press, 1967), 334. Two scandals, the Dreyfus Affair in 1894 and the *affaires des fiches* in 1904, had devastated morale, created factions within the army, and scarred the military's reputation in the eyes of the French people. The Dreyfus Affair, originally a case disputing an army officer's guilt of treason, became a highly politicized spectacle and spurred anti-militarism in sections of the government. By the end of the controversy, the army high command was fraught with "confusion and lack of direction," was "discredited," and could not "provide the army with effective leadership. Accusations of anti-Semitism (Dreyfus was Jewish), falsifying evidence, and ignoring justice also tarnished the army's reputation. The *affaires des fiches* further damaged morale by over-emphasizing political connections rather than military competence as a basis for promotion. Military officers' personal information and information about their families' political views and religious beliefs was collected stored on cards. These cards were then used to select which officers would be promoted. The effect on army morale was dramatic and officer resignations increased, senior leadership weakened, discipline plummeted and unity within the ranks fractured. Officers were divided between those with political clout and those without it which created jealousy, mistrust, and suspicion. Joffre's officers within the ranks were undoubtedly tarnished by the *affaire des fiches* as many of the senior leaders, to include Joffre, were promoted during the time of the scandal. However, Joffre's leadership transcended the problems wrought by the *affaire des fiches;* he had a reputation for being apolitical, was not very religious, and was able to choose his subordinates based upon their military merit, not political affiliations.

[26] Douglas Porch. "Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age,* ed. Peter Paret, Gordon Craig, and Felix Gilbert, 376-407 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 403.

[27] Porch, *The March to the Marne,* 151-155.

[28] Herwig, 54.

[29] Robert A. Doughty, "French Strategy in 1914: Joffre's Own," *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 2 (April 2003): 433.

[30] Joffre, 23, 57, 61.

[31] Joffre, 57-58.

[32] Doughty, *Pyrrhic* Victory, 14.

[33] Doughty, "French Strategy," 435-440; Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 21; Herwig, 55.

[34] Joffre, 54.

[35] Joffre, 53.

[36] Herwig, 55.

[37] Joel. A. Setzen, "Background to the French Failures of August 1914: Civilian and military Dimensions," *Military Affairs* 42, no. 2 (April 1978): 89.

[38] Setzen, 89.

[39] Setzen, 90.

[40] Porch, *The March to the Marne,* 177.

[41] Doughty, Pyrrhic Victory, 38-40.

[42] Doughty, Pyrrhic Victory, 42-43.

[43] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 58-75.

[44] Tyng, 162-165.

[45] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 75-82.

[46] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, 82-92.

[47] Porch, *The March to the Marne,* 217.

[48] Johnston, 12.

[49] Spears, 22-23.

[50] Tyng, 102; Joffre, 199, 207.

[51] Joffre, 207, 212.

[52] Joffre, 212.

[53] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 59-60.

[54] Joffre, 236-237.

[55] Tyng, 187.

[56] Porch, *The March to the Marne,* 223; Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 77.

[57] Joffre, 207.

[58] Joffre, 216; Tyng, 160-161.

[59] Tyng, 161.

[60] Joffre, 206.

[61] Liddell Hart, *Reputations, Ten Years After*, 33; Tyng, 211-220.

[62] Herwig, 310.

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